My focus this summer has been on contributing to another book project. The topic is a new departure for me, and Map of the Month was inspired by it. Summer now seems to be over and, with autumn upon us, this is the last chance to see Four Seasons on the Essex Sunshine Coast: A selection of my posters at Wivenhoe Station. This is well worth a visit if you are within easy traveling distance.

Dates for your diary
The third Schematic Mapping Workshop will be held on 15th/16th April, 2021, at Universität Würzburg, Germany. The basic workshop website is complete and includes the full scope and submission timetable. The portal for submissions is now open, and we are happy to take questions about these at submissions@schematicmapping.org. Reports on all aspects of schematic map research are most welcome.

From 12th July to 12th September the July Map of the Month, plus the three others in the series will be on display at Wivenhoe Station as part of the Off the Rails art project. It is always nice to see maps in their natural habitat – the railway station – and the last time I exhibited there was back in 2013.

In the media, on the web
I was recently interviewed by the Süddeutsche Zeitung and the resulting article (in German) is here: Kurven, Ecken, mehr Übersicht. There is a nice selection of maps to go with the text.

Web page news
I have finally set up a LinkedIn profile. If you have your own LinkedIn page and would like to connect then please contact me, all invitations from newsletter subscribers accepted. In the future, I intend to post Map of the Month there, simultaneously with the newsletter, and I have other ideas for content too.

Map of the Month: Schematising the World
Continuing the theme, from the last newsletter, of country schematisation, an entire world map was needed for an ongoing information design project. We wanted to depict the international trade status for every country in the world, which ran into problems because even the tiniest of nations needed to be visible and identifiable. The result was a schematisation, expanding smaller countries relative to larger ones to make them visible, and simplifying complex, distracting coastlines. However, it is important to show the topology of borders and coastal status correctly, and this limits the extent that topographical distortion can be applied – especially shrinking and enlarging countries. We also had a requirement for visual plausibility such that countries needed to recognisably shaped/located, and sized appropriately in relation to each other. Schematising the world had the useful side-effect that there was less need to worry about the distortion caused by projecting the spherical world onto a plane: The outcome was inevitably going to be distorted in any case.
The design was based on hexagons, which enabled even the smallest country to have up to six borders – although a few non-hexagons did sneak in. The requirements to include even tiny city states and also to have accurate borders forced the expansion of the map in congested areas, most notably for Europe. The desire for compactness led to situations where local regions were plausibly to scale, but nonetheless there was global distortion. For example, the width of Chile is reasonable compared with the size of Brazil, but small compared with the southernmost extension of Myanmar.

With just four exceptions, every country, state and territory that qualifies for an international two-letter designation is shown on this map. People who know their globe projections will observe that the right of the map resembles a cylindrical one but the left tends towards pseudocylindrical. This is partly owing to the properties of the projection itself: Centred on Europe, the shape of Australia and New Zealand suffer with a pseudocylindrical projection, and also owing to the geometric properties of hexagons in relation to the shapes of the continents: North America distorts elegantly in line with a pseudocylindrical projection but Australia does not. Despite the care taken, there are bound to be objections to some of the reshapings, resizings, and island omissions that have taken place: Creating a schematisation of the world is a political as well as a graphical challenge.

I certainly learnt a lot in the process of creating this map, from the location of tiny island and city states to an appreciation of the massive extent of Indonesia. Map of the Month for October will continue my investigation of schematising countries – but it will be less grand in scope – and will return to the theme of transportation – but not for the general public. Subscribe at www.tubemapcentral.com to find out what is in store.

Max Roberts, mjr@tubemapcentral.com